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Global Web Page Design: Issues of Culture and Gender

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The globalization of business has been of considerable interest in both the academic press (e.g., Ho, Ong, & Lee, 1997; Roberts & Hardt, 1997) and the practitioner press (e.g., Business Week Special Report, 1997). As a consequence of the growth in business across borders (e.g., Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1991), it is projected that the global workforce and consumer base will become increasingly diverse by the year 2000 (e.g., Human Resources Institute, 1991). Shaw (1990) has suggested there may be basic differences in how individuals from varying cultures collect, process, store, and use information. This implies that with regard to Web sites, perception and satisfaction differences may exist due to the socialization processes consumers may have experienced in their home countries.

The cultural differences in values held by citizens varies greatly across the globe (Hofstede, 1980; Evans and Sculli, 1981; Hofstede and Bond, 1981, 1988; Kelley, Whatley and Worthley, 1987; Ronen and Shenkar, 1985; Tung, 1991) and must be understood if expatriate managers are to function effectively in these cultures (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985; Mendenhall, Dunbar and Oddou, 1987; Shaw, 1990; Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung and Terpstra, 1992; Ricks, Toyne and Martinez, 1990; Schwartz, 1992; Tung and Miller, 1990). Trompenaars (1996) stated that it is necessary to be able to distinguish cultures from one another. He asserts that the key to successfully working with other cultures is to understand the set of rules and methods which that society has evolved to deal with the regular problems it faces. These form the basis for the norms and values which the community or society holds as right or wrong, or good or bad. The cultural environment is where the strategic processes evolve, and it forms the basis of all other environments by giving them meaning. Every human act, therefore, is a cultural process. Strategy is simply a systematic way of coping with the environment.

Zandpour and Harich (1996) proposed that rather than looking at regional approaches to international advertising standardization, firms should look to the development of country clusters that share characteristics. Various cultures not geographically proximate may be similar in terms of culture and environment, and hence may react in the same fashion to business and advertising. Zandpour and Harich (1996) studied 1914 television commercials from a variety of cultures and developed four clusters which exhibited different traits. They determined that

Australia, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands respond to advertisement emphasizing thinking or logic over emotion while Brazil, Hong Kong, France, Spain, Japan and Sweden exhibit the opposite tendency. Austria, Canada, Germany, Korea and the United States respond to advertisements with high levels of emotion and persuasiveness. Finally, Argentina, Denmark, India and New Zealand favor advertisements with low levels of feeling and thinking.

Electronic commerce has become truly pervasive in Western culture. It is almost impossible to look at an advertisement without seeing a web address, and equally impossible to go to a web address and not find more advertising. Electronic commerce has been primarily influenced by Western culture because that is where the majority of sites were developed and hence many Web pages have followed a North American model for form and format, but that trend is changing. While many developing countries have little or no Web access, many that were slower to develop electronic commerce are surging forward. Current growth trends are expected to continue in a variety of market sectors. For example, in the music industry, electronic commerce currently accounts for only 23 million dollars in an industry that has total sales of 12 billion dollars. However, the electronic commerce portion is expected to hit 2.8 billion dollars by the year 2002 (Fabris, P., Funky Music, CIO, Dec. 1,1997).

Global Web Site Organization

Quelch and Klien (1996) suggest that the development of Web sites for international marketing take an evolutionary path, depending on the orientation of the business. Established multinational corporations (MNCs) approach Web site evolution as the information-to-transaction model. These firms offer information to address the needs of existing customers and then expand the offering to provide a means for customers to conduct transactions. Examples of these large companies include Federal Express, 3M, and Rockport, whose sites provide information on products, services, general information, and in some cases, links to retail outlets. All plan to offer online transactions in the near future. Internet start-ups provide the opposite approach - transaction-to-information. These firms start with transaction oriented sites which over time allow them to use the medium to build a brand image, provide support, and build customer loyalty.

In expanding their model Quelch and Klien (1996) suggest which ever strategy a firm takes toward their Web site, whether targeted towards in internal (existing) or external users, there is always the need to either generate revenue or reduce costs. Their expanded model of Internet business model drivers is composed of four quadants. Quadrant 1 includes firms using the Web primarily as a communication tool to engage in one-way and two-way communications external users who might include

intermediaries and suppliers. These firms provide customer services to the US market and attract international users as a bonus. Quadrant 2 is similar to quadrant 1 in that firms have a domestic focus but also offer transactions on-line (or via fax/phone). These firms use the international audience to capture customers who might otherwise be inaccessible given the small size or limited distribution systems. Firms in quadrant 3 seek to attract an international audience whose customers add value. Despite the non-transactional nature of this quadrant, the firms gain value through the ability to provide instantaneous service or information worldwide. The fourth quadrant expands on the capabilities of quadrant 3 firms by offering transactions worldwide.

In a comparison of the demographic profiles of World Wide Web (WWW) users from seventy five (75) countries, recent studies suggest there are few differences, with both audiences skewed toward college-educated males in their thirties, earning higher-than-average incomes and employed in professional fields (Gupta and Pitwok, 1995). Though dominated by male users, their last survey discovered a marked increase in the growth of female users (29%). Given the commonality that exists between Web users, one can understand the similarity in design and organization of Web sites. It has been widely suggested that a Web site is a Web site, indicating that there are minimal differences in sites regardless of where they were created, were they are hosted, or who the target audience might be. Given the current Western orientation of the WWW, this might be acceptable, but as the Web and its supporting infrastructure expands into Asia, South America, and eventually Africa this orientation might need to be realigned.

Country Culture Dimensions

Comprehensive studies by Hofstede (1984) and his colleagues (e.g., Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) have isolated unique cultural dimensions important in the socialization process. Their research generated five distinctly different cultural dimensions at the macro-cultural level: (1) Power Distance; (2) Uncertainty Avoidance; (3) Masculinity-Femininity; and (4) Individualism-Collectivism; and (5) Long-Term Time Orientation. Each of these cultural dimensions could be assumed to influence an individuals need for social approval (see Geletkanycz, 1997, for a review).

The need for social approval may differ across cultures as a function of the predominant cultural dimensions embedded in the society (Crowne & Marlowe, 1967). Thus unique cultural components could be considered possible indicators of differences in individual behavior with regard to Web utilization and satisfaction among and between countries that cluster on similar dimensions.

H1a: Perception of subjects with regard to a specific Web site will differ significantly in subjects from country clusters with substantial differences in cultural dimensions.

H1b: Satisfaction of subjects with regard to a specific Web site will differ significantly in subjects from country clusters with substantial differences in cultural dimensions.

Gender Differences

While cultural and social differences between groups are important, there are also inter- and intra-cultural gender differences between men and women. Western cultures (eg United States) place strong values on individualism and the expression of personal rights and freedoms whereas other cultures (eg Singapore) are concerned with the rights and freedoms of the society as a whole and the place the individual holds within the greater society. Similarly, the roles of men and women between societies and within societies will differ based upon their backgrounds and training. North American men tend to emphasize independent thinking, feeling and behaving while women emphasize thinking, feeling and behaving in the context of their place in the greater social whole (Cross and Madson, 1997).

Cross and Madson (1997) studied gender differences and developed two categories of individuals: those who developed an independent self-construal (U.S. males) where representations of others are separate from the self (Markus and Kitatma, 1991), and those displaying an interdependent self-construal (U.S. females) where the representations are part of the self. They posit that the differing representations of others will affect how a person feels, thinks, and behaves. Baumeister and Sommer (1997) suggested that the behaviors chronicled by Cross and Madson (1997) are designed to create differing spheres of relationships with men having wider spheres with women focusing on dyadic relationships. They state that while men may not be seeking independence as Cross and Madson (1997) assert, they are developing wider social linkages that will lead to successful professional, social and business relationships.

These differences in upbringing and development could lead males and females to act in differing fashion to everyday circumstances such as reacting to stress, interpersonal relations, and buying patterns. They will be different because they have been trained to be different. Cox (1994) suggests that men and women utilize different communication styles and are different in their mechanisms for processing information. He relates the previous differences is how the genders identify problems. Tannen (1990) notes that women often acknowledge problems in an effort to solicit confirmation, support, and discussion. While men respond with a strongly worded piece of advice on how to solve the problem. Powell (1988) and Epstein (1988) have identified gender differences in behavioral norms and values within a culture. Advertisers have long recognized that successful marketing to genders requires different messages to be sent and received for males versus females. Such a situation must also be addressed when discussing successful Internet Commerce.

H2a: There will be significant gender differences in the perception of Web sites.

H2b: There will be significant gender differences in the satisfaction of Web sites.

Experiment Design

A convenience sample of 160 students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate programs at a large public university located in a metropolitan area in the southwest was recruited as part of this study Subjects were recruited into the experiment based on their region of birth, computing background, length of time in the US, and gender. The researchers organized the subjects into four groups representing the four regional areas - North America, South America, Europe, and Asia - of the subjects birth region, with each group containing twenty (20) males and twenty (20) females. Prior to inclusion in the experiment each subject was screened insuring that he/she was proficient in the use of the Internet (the World Wide Web) and had a desire or inclination to make future use of the Internet, including retail purchases.

The subjects then view four different Web sites, one from each of the four quadrants. After surfing each Web site the subjects were asked to complete a series of questions which determined their perception and satisfaction with that site (the instruments will be discussed in the following section). The subjects were also urged to complete a series of open ended questions which determined what particular aspects of the site they found most appealing, what aspects they found least appealing, and what items they would change to improved their perception and satisfaction. There were no restrictions given to subjects with regard to changes, but it was suggested that they focus on specific items detailed in the following section.

Results

Results indicate that there are indeed significant differences between culture groups and gender.

References

References available upon request.